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A Sanctuary for Discussion: Liberal Religion and Foreign Policy Attitudes

By

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A Sanctuary for Discussion: Liberal Religion and Foreign Policy Attitudes

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Through a series of focus groups conducted in liberal churches, I find that people who attend liberal churches have matching liberal political views. I also find that these liberal congregations do not look to their ministers to dictate acceptable foreign policy views, but that ministers do sometimes discuss foreign policy with their congregations. Most importantly, I find that members of liberal churches have many opportunities to discuss foreign policy issues among themselves, and that members often gain information by participating in these discussions.

Introduction:

Why do some people support government policies designed to help others, while some people do not? More specifically, why do some Americans support “altruistic” foreign policies, such as humanitarian military intervention, emergency food aid, or natural disaster assistance, while other Americans oppose these policies? One possible explanation is that religious beliefs influence people’s attitudes about these policies. Political scientists have long recognized the relationship between religion and politics, especially with regard to domestic social issues. [Opinions on “cultural politics” issues such as women’s rights and sexuality are strongly related to religious beliefs \(Leege and Welch, 1989\), as are opinions on gay rights and same-sex marriage \(Olson et al, 2006\). Support for the death penalty is related to belief in Biblical literalism \(Young, 1993\) and membership in certain Christian denominations \(Eisenberg et. al, 2001\). In many cases, religious variables are the best available predictors for issue stances.](#) More recently, scholars have begun exploring the relationships between religion and foreign policy, [but it is still an under-researched area. Much of the existing research focuses on Evangelical Christians. Baumgartner, Francia, and Morris \(2008\) examined the opinions of evangelical Christians toward the Middle East. Wuthnow and Lewis \(2008\) compared the support for foreign policy altruism among different sub-groups of Christians in the United States, and found that people who attend churches where foreign policy is frequently discussed are more likely to favor anti-poverty and human rights initiatives. They did not find higher levels of support for such policies among Evangelical Christians, as they had hypothesized.](#)

This paper expands upon earlier research [regarding how religious groups may transmit political opinions among members](#). I explore how religious views and foreign policy views are linked; whether [individuals'](#) political views and religious views match, and the mechanisms by which religious involvement affects foreign policy attitudes. [By studying](#) three [liberal](#) churches, I am able to make an important contribution to the study of religion and foreign policy [because](#) much of the existing literature focuses specifically on conservative Evangelical Christians, or the “religious right” and their relationship to the political process. Through this project, I am able to make some conclusions about the opinions of religious liberals, who have been studied less often and are less well understood. [I find that individuals' political and religious views are consistent, and that liberal religious groups may serve as sources of information about foreign policy, but that liberal religious people do not look to clergy as “opinion leaders” to tell them what opinion to have on foreign policy issues.](#)

Theory:

[Literature from public opinion and political psychology](#) suggests a few [mechanisms through](#) which [religion](#) might [influence opinions towards altruistic foreign policy](#), and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some scholars have hypothesized that religious and political beliefs (including views on foreign and domestic policy issues) may both be the result of one's underlying “moral foundations”. These foundations are determined partially by genetic inheritance, and partially by environmental factors. However they come about, it is clear that some

people have absolutist views about morality that generally correlate with fundamentalist religious beliefs and conservative political views, while others have relativist or contextualist views on morality that correlate with non-fundamentalist religious beliefs and liberal political views. Individuals with absolutist moral foundations tend to believe that the best way to fulfill their religious obligation is to personally avoid sinning (Balzer, 2012; Haidt and Graham, 2007). Those with relativist moral foundations, on the other hand, believe that they should be primarily concerned with helping other people (Balzer, 2012; Haidt and Graham, 2007). If this is the mechanism by which religious and political beliefs are both formed, one could expect to see people with absolutist moral foundations participating in fundamentalist or traditional churches and not expressing much support for altruistic foreign policies. One could also expect to see those with relativist moral foundations participating in non-traditional, liberal churches or even avoiding organized religion, and expressing high degrees of support for altruistic foreign policies.

The moral foundations hypothesis is supported by the work of Wuthnow and Lewis (2008) and Baumgartner, Francia, and Morris (2008), although they did not examine the concept of moral foundations directly. Both studies found that evanglical Christians were more likely than people of other faiths to be “hawkish”, and favor policies designed to ensure U.S. military dominance. Baumgartner and his colleagues also found that evanglical Christians have a more negative opinion of Islam than the American public at large, and remain supportive of the Iraq war even as the rest of the public becomes increasingly less supportive. Attitudes of absolutism

may discourage support for altruistic foreign policies especially when the beneficiaries of those policies are of a different faith.

Diven and Constantelos (2009) find that Europeans tend to be more supportive of foreign aid than Americans because they are better informed about aid and more confident in government institutions. They show that Americans tend to overestimate the cost of aid and underestimate its effectiveness, while Europeans are less likely to have such misinformed beliefs. This suggests the possibility that if Americans received accurate information regarding the problems of people in other countries and the capability of the United States to help them, they could become more supportive of existing foreign aid programs.

_____ Religious affiliation may also influence foreign policy opinions through opinion leaders. Opinion leaders are respected individuals who are able to successfully transmit their views to their communities. In his 2004 book on public opinion and American foreign policy, Holsti states that opinion leaders can be anyone in a position of authority, such as mayors, prominent businesspeople, or members of the clergy. Opinion leaders fill a key role in situations where the public has incomplete knowledge about a subject; the public essentially adopts the position of the opinion leader in place of costly information gathering and processing. Since many Americans are uninformed about foreign affairs, we would expect to see opinion leaders having an influence on foreign policy views. I hypothesize that, among religious populations, clergy play an especially important role in shaping foreign policy opinion.

There are two possible mechanisms through which churches might influence their congregations. One way is by playing an informational role. Americans are generally uninformed about foreign affairs, and merely providing facts might be enough to alter their views. If clergy provide accurate information to their congregations, or church members inform each other through discussion, perhaps the church members will develop more positive attitudes about foreign aid and other altruistic foreign policy goals. Wuthnow and Lewis (2008) found that people of all faiths who attend churches where foreign policy is discussed frequently are more likely to support altruistic foreign policies. This finding could be interpreted in several ways. It may suggest that religion is not particularly important, but that accurate information about foreign policy results in more support for it, as Diven and Constantelos (2009) argue. It may also be that exposure to information about the plight of others may increase empathy and liking (Finnemore, 2003; Harff, 1987), which in turn encourages support for policies that help them.

Another possibility is that religious leaders persuade rather than just provide information. Clergy could do this by taking a position on a foreign policy issue in a sermon, for example. The dynamic between clergy and their congregations varies between religious traditions, and even between individual churches, but many congregations do view their leaders with quite a bit of deference and respect. Congregations that have high amounts of respect for their leaders' opinions would be likely to adopt similar views, because they consider their leaders to be reliable sources. In some religious groups, laypeople believe that it is necessary for them to follow the dictates of their clergy in order to remain members of their congregations,

or even to receive the promised benefits of their faith (such as going to heaven). In this type of environment, clergy members would have very strong opinion-leading effects. If opinion leaders play a persuasive role, one can expect congregations to support altruistic foreign policy goals only if their leaders do.

Based on the existing literature, one can identify the following hypotheses:

H1: People who attend liberal churches will also favor liberal foreign policy positions, including international humanitarian aid. People who attend conservative churches will not. In other words, their religious and political views will match.

H2: Members of churches that discuss foreign policy on a regular basis will be more supportive of altruistic foreign policies than members of churches that do not, due to the informational effect.

H3: Church members will adopt the views of their religious leaders when forming opinions about foreign policy issues. Clergy act as opinion leaders for their congregations.

Methodology:

To explore the mechanisms by which religion affects foreign policy views, I conducted focus groups in three churches. The churches were located in a Midwestern city containing a major state university. The churches were contacted first by email, and then by phone if necessary, to recruit interested participants and schedule the focus groups. The focus groups ranged in size from two to fifteen participants. I conducted all the focus groups, audio-recorded the discussions, and transcribed them. Each focus group session was based upon five broad questions (see

[Appendix A: Focus Group Protocol](#)), and discussion was allowed to continue as long as the participants wanted. The duration of the focus group sessions varied from about thirty minutes to an hour and fifteen minutes.

My initial plan for this project was to conduct focus groups at several places of worship representing a variety of religious traditions. Unfortunately, many of the places of worship I contacted were unable or unwilling to participate in the project. The three churches that did agree to host focus groups were similar to each other in a number of important ways, so I have less variation than I had hoped for. The [places of worship](#) included a Unitarian Universalist church, a United Church of Christ (also called a Congregational Church), and a United Methodist church. All three identified themselves as liberal denominations. The Unitarian Universalist church is a non-doctrinal religion that allows diversity in theological beliefs among its members. Unitarian Universalists draw spiritual inspiration from a number of sources, including Christianity, Judaism, eastern religions, Humanism, and earth-centered nature religions, and free thought is encouraged. Members [of Unitarian Universalist congregations](#) follow the Seven Principles, but these are not as rigid as the commandments found in other religions. The United Church of Christ and United Methodist church are Christian denominations. Members of each of these churches indicated that while they believe in Jesus Christ as their savior, there is room for disagreement on other theological points. Some variety is present in each church, and members may disagree with regard to how literally to interpret the Bible, for example.

These three congregations have been involved with each other in community activities. The ministers of all three churches signed a letter in support of a proposed fairness ordinance that would protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals from employment discrimination in their city. The Unitarian Universalist church and the United Church of Christ ordain, employ, and perform marriages for LGBT individuals, and although the General Conference of the United Methodist Church recently rejected a proposal to allow gay clergy, this particular congregation is welcoming to LGBT people. The three churches I interviewed also participate together in a program called the Interfaith Housing Coalition, which is dedicated to providing affordable housing to the low-income residents of their city. Members of all three churches make monetary donations and contribute to ongoing maintenance projects at the buildings they jointly own and operate.

The three churches also have a history of interest in international issues. All three denominations have affiliated non-profit organizations that focus on international issues and engage in a variety of charitable projects in developing nations. The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, for example, has participated in emergency responses to the ongoing famines in several East African countries including Somalia and the 2011 tsunami in Japan, as well as longer-term projects such as campaigns supporting national and international legislation to declare access to safe water a human right (Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, 2012). It is therefore not surprising that these three churches expressed an interest in participating in a study on religion and foreign policy. I suspect that the churches who participated may have done so because of an existing interest in the issue.

Most participants in all three focus groups were over 50 years of age, and all identified themselves as moderate, liberal, or very liberal. Most participants were upper middle class, and none were poor. All were white and were born in the United States. The demographics of the groups I interviewed are only partially representative of the demographics of the churches at large. Participants in each group were very similar because in two of the three churches, I conducted the focus groups in existing study or discussion groups. Both of these existing groups meet regularly, one weekly and one monthly, and both had discussed issues of foreign policy before agreeing to participate in my focus groups. All of the churches do have a wider range of ages in their congregations than in the groups that were available and interested in participating in the focus groups. It may be that retired people simply have more time to participate in activities outside normal church hours.

In my study, it was necessary to use focus groups taken from existing places of worship rather than using individual surveys, or focus groups amalgamated from a variety of churches, because religion is an inherently social phenomenon. In addition to a common theology, members of religious congregations often share norms and standards for behavior in a variety of situations. Sociologists, and constructivists within political science, think of reality as a social construction. Groups of people create the universe that they inhabit, and new members are socialized into the universe (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). However, people are generally not conscious of this. They think of the universe they inhabit not as one of many possible universes, but as *the* universe. Because religion is such an important part of people's lives, at least in the American Midwest, it is likely that religious communities have stronger

effects than other types of social groups. For this reason, different religious groups may have different understandings about the way the world works. Different groups of people may, for example, support the same foreign policy, but for very different reasons. Focus groups allow us not only to collect opinions, but the reasoning behind them as well. In my study, by allowing people to interact in their own preexisting religious groups, I will be able to observe the social dynamics that lead to opinion formation rather than relying on an aggregation of individual opinions.

Findings:

The participants in my focus groups all identified themselves as belonging to liberal religious denominations, and that their own political views were moderate, liberal, or very liberal. This supports the hypothesis that people's religious and political views generally match, and may be based on a common underlying moral foundation. The focus group from the United Church of Christ, for example, focused on the love of Christ when asked about their beliefs:

“I do think that this is a church that tries to be inclusive, that respects a variety of opinions, and that puts it's focus on God's love for us and what that means for us. And really puts the focus on what love means, not what fear of God would do to us.”

Many other participants expressed agreement with this statement, and asserted that a focus on the love of God rather than the fear of God was what distinguished them from many other denominations. They also stated that many of their political opinions stemmed from a desire to spread the love of God. This supports the hypothesis that religious liberals are concerned with helping others, and less concerned with avoiding sin.

My results suggest that churches play an informational role with regard to foreign affairs. All three churches reported that their ministers sometimes discuss foreign policy issues with the congregation. All three also reported that discussion groups exist within the churches, and that groups of church members often discuss foreign policy among themselves. For example, the Unitarian Church has several groups called Open Circles that consist of about five to ten members and meet monthly for one year. These groups discuss a variety of topics, determined by the group members, sometimes including foreign policy. The group I met with from the United Church of Christ is an existing group that meets to discuss books, some of which have been related to foreign policy. When I talked with them, they had plans to read and discuss Rachel Maddow's recent book, *Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power*. One participant also stated that he belonged to a men's group within the church that also discussed foreign policy issues routinely.

Participants from all three churches also reported that casual conversations between church members on Sunday mornings frequently include foreign policy topics.

Based on the focus groups I conducted, it appears that the members of these three churches are better informed about foreign policy than the average American. In each focus group, the participants brought up the United Nations Security Council without prompting from me. They were aware of, and correctly named, the Permanent Five members, and knew that each of these countries has veto power over resolutions in the Security Council. Each group was also aware of the current conflict in Syria and did not ask for additional information before offering an opinion, although I offered to provide a summary of news articles in case anyone was

unfamiliar. Most participants were also able to name specific examples when discussing broader phenomena. For example, one participant from the United Church of Christ identified Israel, Pakistan, and Egypt when arguing that U.S. military aid contributed to instability. It seems that participation in numerous formal and informal church groups that discuss foreign policy contributes to the surprising amount of foreign policy knowledge among these people.

The results of the three focus groups I conducted suggest that ministers, at least in liberal religious denominations, do not act as opinion leaders for their congregations. Participants from all three groups stated that while their ministers may discuss foreign affairs, they do not take positions on specific issues. In fact, all three groups emphasized their desire to maintain an environment in which divergences of opinion would be respected, and suggested that they would be unhappy with a minister who tried to convince them to adopt a certain position. [For example, one member of the United Church of Christ said,](#)

[“It’s a very large church, and there are many varied views on issues of this nature here, and I think the minister might not be doing a positive service if he tried to tell us what to think about foreign policy. I really think that might alienate even those who agreed with him if he did that, because I don’t know that that’s really his role.”](#)

Some participants, however, asserted that they believe this experience to be atypical and that clergy in other, [more conservative,](#) churches do serve as opinion leaders for their congregations. Further research is needed to see if this is true.

All three of the focus groups expressed the opinion that the United States should be involved in international affairs, but that its current approach is unhelpful or even counterproductive. Several participants said that the United States overuses

military options when trying to solve problems, and operates with a lack of understanding of the complexities of the situation and the history of the country in

question. When asked if the U.S. government should become involved in the current Syrian conflict, one United Church of Christ member said this:

It's a matter of uh, the problem of unintended consequences is so obvious over the last few, uh, interventions that to go into Syria, what we'd be letting loose, I think there's good reason not to act just from the standpoint of, nothing else we've done in the last 40 years has worked, why would we think something is going to be helpful now?

Many of the participants said that they would like to see the United States engage in diplomacy rather than military actions, but believe that U.S. culture is too militaristic. One United Methodist participant argued that the United States has failed to meet ethical standards of when warfare is appropriate:

"...you've probably heard of just war theory. The Methodist church is very much behind the idea of a just war, and I think we feel that those conditions aren't observed a lot nowadays. War should be a last resort, and people are often going in too quickly into wars. So we would try to avoid wars as much as possible, recognizing that there are times when you need to have a national defense, but I think that excuse is overused.

Many participants in the focus groups stated that the United States should become more involved with the United Nations. They seemed to believe that if the U.S. government were to participate more in United Nations negotiations, and adhere to the U.N. charter when making foreign policy decisions, the United States would use military force less often.

Many participants also expressed the desire to see the U.S. government focused on world problems, rather than "American" problems. Some issues mentioned repeatedly included global warming, the worldwide water crisis, and food

shortages in developing nations. One Unitarian Universalist participant, when asked what specific foreign policy issues the United States should become more involved in said the following:

I think we should go back to the peace dividend that we never saw when the Cold War ended. They were promising how many billions of dollars would be freed up to rebuild the schools, blah blah blah... and if you look at like water shortages and things like that around the world, it's amazing how little money, how many few billions of dollars it would take to provide everybody with a decent supply of clean water, sanitation. I mean, there's no reason that if we could think of a problem in the world that there's a solution to, if everybody got together you could create those solutions. Nobody needs to live in poverty in the world, nobody needs to go hungry, there's plenty of food.

Several participants stated that the United States ought to define its self-interest more broadly in order to encompass these issues. One participant from the United Church of Christ had this to say about the purpose of government:

"I guess from an idealistic point of view, I think my idea about foreign policy, and my idea about domestic policy is all the same. We should be really thinking about the welfare, and having a... I don't know what words to use... good, productive, meaningful, vibrant life for every person as much as possible. This should be the purpose of government for the people who live in a country, and it also should be the purpose of our foreign policy to try to promote the same thing around the world. And there's all different ways to do that, but that should be our bottom line, should be the ordinary people all over the world, not other considerations."

A participant from the Unitarian Universalist group made the same basic point:

"I could see less foreign military aid. It seems like you give them weapons and then you have to go over there and destroy the weapons to keep them from using them. And you could use that money then for these humanitarian things we were talking about. Education for women so we could slow down the population boom, you can give them clean water, all these kinds of things that are infrastructure things that are not that terribly expensive and don't create hard feelings with everybody in the world that make them want to come after you."

The focus group participants seemed to be in general agreement that engaging in humanitarian efforts is not only morally appropriate, but also best for the United States' interests in the long run. They see it as a way to make the world safer and reduce the number of people with grievances against the United States. It is worth noting that the international nonprofit organizations affiliated with these denominations already participate in humanitarian efforts similar to those described by the focus group participants. This suggests that they are stepping in where they believe governments should be acting. Some participants, particularly in the Unitarian Universalist group, argued that the United States currently allows corporations to define its interests, and that this prevents important long-term issues from being adequately addressed since corporations tend to favor short-term economic gains, and measure their success in quarters of years rather than years or decades. These participants argued that if the government were free of corporate influence, it could begin to pay attention to global issues such as global warming that need to be dealt with over long time periods.

Conclusion:

Based upon these three focus groups, one can make important conclusions about the relationship of liberal religious beliefs to foreign policy views. First, and perhaps least surprising, people who attend liberal churches tend to have liberal political views. This supports the idea that some kind of moral foundations give rise to both religious and political views. Contrary to my hypothesis, liberal churchgoers do not seem to treat clergy as opinion leaders. Based on their statements in focus

groups, they value diversity of opinion and would consider it inappropriate for a member of clergy to espouse a policy position from the pulpit and expect the congregation to support it. Consistent with my hypothesis, liberal churches do seem to function as providers of foreign policy information. The participants in my focus groups were surprisingly well informed about a variety of areas of foreign policy. For example, members in each group correctly identified the Permanent Five members of the United Nations Security Council, and were familiar with the voting procedure. Members of all three churches identified a variety of sources of foreign policy information in their churches, including ministers mentioning issues (but not advocating policy positions), book discussion groups, and denominational publications. Since all participants in my focus groups attended such churches, it was not possible to tell if more information correlates with higher support for humanitarian foreign policy, but all participants were well informed and all did support some level of humanitarian foreign policy.

This study also sets the stage for future research. Since it appears that liberal religious groups do not look to their clergy as opinion leaders, it is necessary to find out if the same is true for conservative religious groups. Several participants suggested based on previous experience with different churches that conservative congregations might regard their clergy as opinion leaders and fear to disagree with them, but this is anecdotal. It would be necessary to conduct focus groups with conservative churches to find out. On a related note, similar focus groups should be conducted in churches where there are fewer opportunities for foreign policy information dissemination to see if people were less supportive of humanitarian

foreign policies. An ideal future project would repeat the focus group questions from this study with a wider variety of churches, both liberal and conservative, in order to directly compare the two.

Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

Questions:

1. What does your church believe?

Prompt: If there is a central message of your faith, what is it?

2. Does your religious leader ever talk about foreign policy during services or other church events? Do you discuss foreign policy with other members?

3. What, if anything, should the United States government do about the events in Syria?

(Provide description of events as information becomes available.)

4. What do you think should be the first priority of U.S. foreign policy?

Prompt: Terrorism, the Afghanistan war, helping other countries in need, maintaining military dominance, security, or something else?

5. Do you believe the United States is too involved in foreign affairs, not involved enough, or involved the appropriate amount? Are there any particular issues you would like to see the United States more or less involved in?

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